

Comparative Media Framing and Agenda Setting: Analyzing Chinese and U.S. Coverage of the Bucha Incident in the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract: Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, the mainstream international media have joined the war of public opinion and information, and the “truth” seems to be getting confused. Countries are forced to rethink the role of the media in international conflicts, which has been seriously underestimated in the past. Against the backdrop of the US-China competition, the Chinese and US media have not only diverged in their values and political concepts, but have also exchanged views on national interests when reporting on Russia and Ukraine. This paper selects the Bucha incident in the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 as a research text, applies agenda-setting and framing theories to compare the differences in the intensity of coverage, characterization, diction, sources of information, audiences, and narrative techniques between the media of China and the U.S. in their coverage of the incident, as well as to try to explore its causes and effects. The analysis concludes that in the geopolitical context of US-China competition, there are significant differences in the media coverage of the same event between the two countries, and that the media in the two countries cover the event out of their own political needs, and that the differences in the coverage are fundamentally due to the differences in the two countries’ stances and policies towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Keywords: media, framing, agenda setting, Bucha Incident, Russia-Ukraine war

1. Introduction

Contemplating the meticulous crafting of narratives surrounding global conflicts — a deliberate interplay of truth and perception intricately intertwined — significantly influences people’s comprehension of events unfolding beyond the horizons. In an era characterized by rapid globalization and instant connectivity, the role of the media in shaping public perceptions and agendas has never been more profound. This paper delves into the intricate interplay between media framing, agenda setting, and international conflict coverage by juxtaposing the approaches of American and Chinese media outlets — specifically, the venerable New York Times and the state-backed Xinhua News Agency — towards the Russia-Ukraine war. The focus narrows to a pivotal event within this conflict, the Bucha Incident, as a case study to illuminate how media narratives and priorities diverge across these two influential nations.

The influential role of the media in shaping public opinions and steering discussions cannot be underestimated. In today's digital era, The New York Times has adeptly harnessed technological advancements to extend its global reach. With a substantial readership spanning millions of print and online subscribers, The New York Times occupies a pivotal position within the media landscape, exerting its influence not only on public discourse but also on policy deliberations. Its diverse format spans both print and digital platforms, encompassing in-depth analyses, editorials, and multimedia presentations, which collectively contribute to its extensive impact. In contrast, established in 1931, Xinhua News Agency stands as the principal state news agency of the People's Republic of China. Some of the internal norms promulgated by Xinhua News Agency hold a prominent role within the Chinese press landscape. Being among the earliest news organizations to adopt a global footprint, Xinhua News Agency operates China's premier news website, often referred to as "China's most influential website" This platform disseminates news and information around the clock, in seven languages, and through various multimedia formats. Notably, its global website consistently maintains a stable ranking around 190.

The Russia-Ukraine war, an ongoing conflict that has captured global attention, holds the potential to reveal the stark differences in media coverage between the American and Chinese perspectives. On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marking one of the most significant conflicts in Europe since World War II. Within this multifaceted conflict, the Bucha Incident emerges as a pivotal episode warranting comprehensive analysis. Occurring as a part of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Kiev Offensive, this incident involved civilian casualties attributed to the armed forces of the Russian Federation in Bucha, Kiev Oblast, Ukraine. This incident took place during the Battle of Kiev, and investigations following the retaking of the city by Ukrainian forces on April 2, 2022, revealed the horrific conditions of a large number of civilians who were killed, and the footage was streamed live via social media platforms, serving as vivid evidence of the Russian military's occupation of the city in order to demonstrate the large number of war crimes committed by Russian forces in the occupied region. In this regard, Ukraine accused Russia of committing war crimes, alleging that the Bucha Incident may have constituted a premeditated and organized genocidal massacre. However, it's important to note that Russia vehemently refutes these allegations of massacres, asserting that they were intentionally fabricated by Ukraine and the Western powers. According to Russia, the photographic and video evidence from Bucha was produced by the Ukrainian government with the aim of manipulating Western media and provoking international outrage.

Comparing mainstream media in the United States and China regarding the Bucha incident in the Russia-Ukraine conflict highlights a significant contrast in how they prioritize reporting and approach editorial processes.

2. Literature Review

A number of theoretical developments in communication provide the basis for this study. Entman provides a comprehensive review and critique of the concept of framing and discusses its role in shaping public understanding [1]. Building upon Entman's foundations, Dietram A. Scheufele and Shanto Iyengar have scrutinized framing effects in various contexts, from political campaigns to scientific communication, unraveling novel insights into the interplay between media framing and audience responses [2]. Similarly, Pan and Kosicki have extended this framework to analyze international news coverage, uncovering the nuanced ways in which media frames shape cross-cultural understandings [3]. In the case of Entman's recognition that issues can be framed in multiple ways, Pan and Kosicki discuss different levels of framing analysis, including macro-level frames, mid-level frames, and micro-level frames [1, 3]. Shanto Iyengar have explored the priming effects of media frames on individuals' perceptions and opinions [4]. Other researchers, such as

Ann Crigler and Maxwell McCombs, have also contributed to the understanding of how media frames can activate mental constructs and influence the processing of information [5]. The Priming Model also highlights the interplay between verbal and visual frames. In this context, Fahmy's research has contributed to understanding visual framing in the context of news media. She explores how visual elements, such as images and graphics, can influence public opinion and understanding of news events. Her work emphasizes how visual frames work in conjunction with verbal frames to shape meaning [6].

In recent years, scholars have been placing frames in the context of specific events. Zheng and Li explore the media construction of major events in the U.S. mainstream media in terms of three dimensions, namely, context creation, use of linguistic identifiers, sources, and predisposition, which provide direction for the differences in the delineation of frames when analyzing the use of media frames [7]. Hao showed the mechanism of news framework in Chinese and American disaster report and revealed the function of news framework [8]. Hans W. A. Hanley, Deepak Kumar and Zakir Durumeric used qualitative analysis, they pointed that coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine varied widely across Western, Russian, and Chinese media ecosystems, with propaganda, disinformation, and narratives in all three media ecosystems [9]. QF Kwei examined the framing of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict by the web-based news media in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and China through an exploratory sequential in order to examine the differences in online news coverage by media in these four countries [10].

Similarly, there are agenda setting models that have been introduced to analyze news media coverage. Maxwell McCombs, from a study conducted during the 1968 presidential campaign, discovered the influence of the media in shaping the salience of issues, based on which he then further elaborated on the Agenda-Setting Theory and introduced the concept of "media agenda" and "public agenda" [11]. He emphasized the media's power to influence the public's perception of the importance of various issues through the selection and presentation of news [11]. McCombs extended the Agenda-Setting Theory to the context of political elections. He examined how the media's portrayal of candidates and issues during the 1976 presidential election influenced public perceptions and opinions [12].

In the evolution of communication theories, it is evident that both framing theory and agenda setting have undergone significant development and refinement. Past research has notably matured in two key aspects: the comparative analysis of news frames across different media outlets covering the same event, and the utilization of agenda setting to dissect the dynamics of news dissemination and its impact on audience perceptions. However, a critical gap remains in the literature—a lack of comprehensive examination that combines these two influential theories within the context of a single event.

This article endeavors to bridge this gap by introducing a novel approach that not only amalgamates framing theory and agenda setting but also applies these theories to scrutinize media coverage of a specific and highly significant event — the Bucha Incident within the Russia-Ukraine War. The innovation lies not only in the theoretical synthesis but also in the practical application of these frameworks to analyze real-world reporting. Furthermore, the timing of this study is of paramount importance, given the ongoing nature of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. By concentrating on the media's portrayal of the Bucha Incident within the broader context of this protracted conflict, this research maintains contemporary relevance and offers valuable insights into how media narratives shape public perceptions in the midst of an evolving geopolitical situation.

The purpose of this paper is to apply framing theory to analyze the number of framing levels, content focus, vocabulary use, and image use in the mainstream media's coverage of the Bucha incident in China and the United States, and at the same time to use agenda-setting to compare whether the media reported on the incident in the same time period, and how much they reported on

the incident. This research would emphasize they offer distinct insights into different aspects of media influence. Agenda Setting focuses on issue salience, and Framing examines the interpretive frameworks used in news content [13].

3. Methodology

The primary source of data for this study consists of selected reports in the New York Times and Xinhua News Agency related to the Bucha Incident in the Russia-Ukraine War. These articles were collected from the websites of these two media outlets, covering a predetermined timeframe from the aftermath of the civilian deaths in Bucha to the present day, in order to capture a comprehensive view of their coverage. A total of 30 reports on the Bucha incident were collected from the New York Times, 7 reports from Xinhua News Agency were collected, and a total of 23 articles from Xinhua's subsidiaries and affiliated reporting magazines were included in the study.

The analysis of China and the United States and their media is a systematic topic, which involves the specifics of previous media coverage and the different social contexts of the two countries in which the media operates. Therefore, the qualitative analysis method can be used in a more comprehensive, informative and culturally contextual manner. To comprehensively investigate the nuances of media framing and agenda setting in the context of Chinese and U.S. coverage of the Bucha Incident within the Russia-Ukraine War, the adoption of content analysis as a qualitative research method is both necessary and feasible. Content analysis offers a systematic approach to dissect the textual and visual components of media content, allowing for the identification of underlying themes, patterns, and discursive strategies employed by media outlets. By scrutinizing the selection of information, the emphasis placed on specific aspects, and the language choices used in the coverage, content analysis provides a structured framework to uncover the divergent approaches of Chinese and U.S. media in shaping narratives. The necessity of content analysis stems from its capacity to offer a rigorous and objective examination of media content, facilitating an in-depth exploration of media frames and agendas that might otherwise remain concealed. Thus, content analysis emerges as a robust and effective method to fulfill the objectives of the study, enabling a nuanced examination of how media in China and the United States frame and set the agenda for the Bucha Incident in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

4. Results

In terms of content and subject bias, Chinese and American media differ in content and subject matter bias. The U.S. media paid more attention to the casualties and humanitarian impact of the Bucha incident, while China focused more on telling the causes and consequences of the incident and presenting the situation. The American media pays more attention to the details of giving voice to ordinary Ukrainians by empowering their audience and portraying a vulnerable image of Ukraine's resilience and resistance. New York Times outlet document the detailed social media dynamics of multiple victims, and New York Times reporters have translated text messages and social media posts into English. It can significantly amplify the voices of those affected and bring attention to their stories. These coverages included the accounts, posts of victims on social media platforms may humanize their experiences, evoke empathy from the audience. In terms of relationship with the audiences, reporting on the lives of ordinary people is psychologically closer to the audience, and at the same time more expressive, contagious and influential, which is also one of the key methods of the American media's coverage of the Bucha incident. In the New York Times story "Their final moments: Victims of a Russian Atrocity in Bucha", news narratives are captured directly from individuals and communities. By including the voices of victims, the

analysis can reveal marginalized or underrepresented perspectives that may have been overlooked in the Chinese media, which used traditional top-down journalism in the Bucha case.

In addition to the media subject matter, the framing hierarchy demonstrates that American media employ more intricate layers of frames in their coverage of the Bucha incident compared to Chinese media. These frames in American coverage operate within a dynamic scenario-based structure that extends from micro to macro levels, spanning both Ukraine's internal dynamics and international perspectives, including the United Nations. There is an image of Ukrainian President Zelensky in the United Nations Security Council in the US media, which reports that he detailed the killing of a large number of civilians in Bucha, with an accompanying text stating that he demanded that the international community, including the United Nations, fulfill its obligations with regard to the maintenance of international peace, or else the United Nations might as well be disbanded. The image was accompanied by scenes of delegates listening to Zelensky's speech at UN headquarters, suggesting that the international community should impose further sanctions on Russia to stop its behavior. The U.S. media tries to confirm the authenticity of the large number of civilians killed in the Bucha region with multiple scenarios. The selection of focalization, the depth of narrative engagement, and the description of physical settings contribute to the reader's spatial experience [14]. Especially in the case of "war", a grandiose scenario that many ordinary people in peaceful times and areas have never experienced, the American media used the Bucha incident as the main scenario and released several scenarios at various levels that were closely connected to the main scenario, once again re-establishing the connection between the media and the audience, and reconstructing a scenario about the Bucha incident and even the opening of the crisis and the post-crisis conflict. The media's connection with the audience was re-established, reconstructing a scene about the Bucha incident and even the conflict after the crisis. The American mainstream media eliminated the distance between the audience and the crisis in time and space through the ever-changing scenarios, so as to achieve the unification of public opinion dissemination and the audience's sense of time and space, and to enhance the dissemination power of the news.

There are also significant differences in terminology between the Chinese and American media. The U.S. mainstream media repeatedly used qualitative terms such as "murder," "massacre," and even "genocide," "crimes against humanity," as well as descriptive phrases such as "horrific" to describe the events in Bucha. and even "genocide," "crimes against humanity," as well as descriptive words such as "horrific" to describe the events in Bucha, which set the basic discourse framework for the U.S. media's polemic against Russia in the Ukrainian crisis. This choice of words further demonstrates that the U.S. media is trying to portray the other side in a negative frame [15]. The Chinese official media blanketly described the incident as "civilian deaths in Bucha". Chinese official media reports used the terms "speculation" by the United States and "publicizing the 'civilian deaths in Bucha'" by the United States and Ukraine. Xinhua News Agency, in its public website, adopted a similar formulation: "Who is the murderer? Naturally, this is another mystery and the focus of a fierce diplomatic battle", and the speculation on the term "mystery" fully reflects the attitude of the media. China's official media, published an opinion piece on the 5th under the title "U.S. closely follows the speculation on the 'Bucha incident'". The author described the tragedy in the town of Bucha in terms of "civilian deaths publicized by the United States and Ukraine", emphasized that the Russian side had repeatedly denied it, and mentioned that the accusation by US President Joe Biden that Vladimir Putin was a "war criminal" had aroused the Kremlin's dissatisfaction. As for the actions of the Russians, they deliberately emphasized that this was a unilateral claim by Ukraine. Entering the keyword "Bucha massacre" into the search box of Chinese official media websites will result in "no relevant content".

Besides differences in terminology, differences in sources of information and content material become apparent when further comparisons are made. Notably, the American media relied heavily

on primary sources, utilizing visual evidence and compelling images to convey the gravity of the Bucha incident. In contrast, the Chinese media's use of quotes from external sources, while limited, offers insights into their framing choices. For example, the New York Times said it had concluded after an eight-month visual investigation that there were 36 Ukrainian victims on Yablenska Street and that the perpetrators were Russian paratroopers. A first-hand account not only enhances news authenticity and credibility, it also means more access to the most visual images and videos. News stories with compelling visuals are more effective in influencing public attitudes and have a strong emotional impact on viewers [16]. In another news story, the New York Times obtained street surveillance of Bucha and used a 13-second video in its news report, contrasting the calm streets with pedestrians before the Bucha incident with the images of tanks passing by afterward, creating a visual impact. Xinhua's reports contained large quotes from multiple media outlets, such as "Reuters Washington" and "RIA Novosti Moscow", which appeared in the same report, mostly in the form of a single text. This also indirectly influenced the small amount of coverage of the Bucha incident in the Chinese mainstream media.

It is worth noting that the preceding discussion focuses primarily on framing. Framing theory illuminates how the media in China and the United States portrayed the burqa incident in different ways in specific news reports. In addition to the interpretive frames used in news content, however, the media's positioning of the salience of the issue deserves equal attention. The media can influence the public agenda by highlighting specific issues and topics in news coverage, which will provide further insights into the differences in the media's news on the Bucha incident in these countries [13]. Mainstream media in China and the United States sway what people pay attention to by whether and how much information and related topics are scheduled during a given time period. The U.S. online media had significantly more coverage of the war than China. The Xinhua News Agency station has a total of seven stories about the Bucha incident, and the earliest Xinhua story about the Bucha incident was on April 6, 2022, the fourth day after the Bucha incident. The agency's few stories focused on April 6 and April 7, with no further mentions on the topic before or in the time period since then to date. The U.S. media, on the other hand, reacted immediately to the event. This delayed reaction and comprehensive coverage may indicate that the Bucha incident was generally given less attention by Chinese online news media and that Chinese media reduced the prominence of the incident.

5. Discussion

The reports on civilian deaths in Bucha, within the context of the Russia-Ukraine War, can vary significantly between Chinese and American media due to differences in media landscapes, political perspectives, and international relations. Chinese media focused on the broader narrative of the Russia-Ukraine War, emphasizing China's stance on non-interference in other countries' internal affairs and respecting sovereignty. American media might approach the situation from a different angle, emphasizing the human cost of the war and its impact on innocent civilians. Reports could delve into the details of the incident, investigating the causes and potential parties responsible for the civilian deaths. American media might also highlight calls for international intervention, sanctions against certain actors, or increased support for Ukraine in response to the perceived violation of human rights.

Divergent media narratives can be attributed to geopolitical interests, political alliances, and domestic audiences. Chinese media may prioritize maintaining good relations with Russia or adopt a more cautious approach to international conflicts. The ownership and control of media organizations can influence the political content they produce. Concentration of media ownership can result in certain political viewpoints dominating the media landscape [17]. As the mouthpiece of the government, China's official media report content and views that are closely related to

national strategy. It is also inevitable that the American media, as exemplified by the New York Times, may be influenced by political parties and biased, for example by the liberal left, and reflect the Bucha incident. On the other hand, the media may be influenced by inertia and stereotypes. In the eyes of the Chinese media, during the Kosovo war, the United States and the West said that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had massacred civilians in Kosovo, when in fact a large number of Serbs had been killed. During the Iraq War, the US Secretary of State said that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction while holding laundry detergent. These historical reasons, which have served as excuses for the United States to send troops, have influenced current views.

Different media narratives have a profound effect on the understanding and standing of the receiving public and even society. Primarily, for audience perception, varied reports encountered by different audiences may lead to disparate viewpoints regarding the war and its ramifications. American viewers exposed to accounts of the Bucha incident from their own media sources may develop a strongly anti-Russian stance and harbor negative sentiments towards the entirety of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In contrast, Chinese audiences may ponder whether this represents a Western media conspiracy or adopt a more composed, wait-and-see approach. Furthermore, contrasting media coverage can exert an impact on diplomatic relations between nations. The comprehensive portrayal of the Bucha incident by U.S. media was interpreted by China as an instance of exaggerated rumor-mongering, perceived as a deliberate manipulation by Western media, and associated with a U.S. imperialist conspiracy. Such interpretations are not conducive to fostering favorable international relations. U.S. policymakers also criticized the Chinese media for their delayed coverage and apparent lack of attention, thereby raising questions about China's standing as a 'responsible great power' on the global stage. Additionally, it's essential to acknowledge that media narratives can, in certain instances, be exploited for disseminating disinformation or propaganda, further complicating the comprehension and response to unfolding events. Some media outlets may have fabricated aspects of the Bucha incident to advance their particular agendas.

Addressing issues related to media reports requires a multi-faceted approach that involves media organizations, journalists, audiences, policymakers, and society as a whole. Firstly, media organizations should adhere to ethical journalism standards, including accurate reporting, fact-checking, and avoiding sensationalism. Journalists should strive to present balanced and unbiased information. Secondly, promote media pluralism by encouraging a variety of media outlets, such as support public media outlets that are free from commercial pressures and can provide more balanced and unbiased coverage of events. This can help reduce the dominance of a single narrative. Thirdly, media organizations should disclose their sources of funding to ensure transparency and mitigate potential biases resulting from financial influences. Fourthly, encourage audiences to engage in critical thinking and consider multiple sources of information before forming opinions. Avoid relying solely on one media outlet. Lastly, encourage international collaboration in media reporting to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of global events. A combination of efforts from various stakeholders is necessary to promote accurate, balanced, and ethical media coverage.

While the primary objective of this study is to deliver a comprehensive comparative analysis of media framing and agenda setting in the coverage of the Bucha Incident as presented by The New York Times and Xinhua News Agency, it is vital to acknowledge the inherent limitations intrinsic to the research design. A noteworthy constraint of this study pertains to the relatively small sample size of media articles subjected to analysis. The dearth of extensive mainstream media coverage of this event within China itself presents a substantial data collection challenge. Consequently, the outcomes may not attain the desired breadth and scope. Such constraints could potentially impact the applicability of the findings and the capacity to draw robust, overarching conclusions

concerning media framing strategies that are representative of the entirety of the Chinese media landscape. Plus, the paucity of coverage implies that the chosen articles might not adequately encompass the full spectrum of perspectives encompassed within the broader Chinese media landscape.

6. Conclusion

In the course of analyzing the media coverage of the Bucha incident within the broader context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a clear and distinct contrast emerges between the approaches taken by mainstream media outlets in the United States and China. This examination into comparative media framing and agenda setting highlights not only the divergent priorities these two global media giants uphold but also the nuanced editorial processes that underpin their respective narratives. The focal point of this study has been to shed light on the remarkable differences in how the Bucha incident has been portrayed and contextualized by media outlets in these two influential nations. While the United States media appears to emphasize specific aspects of the incident, reflecting its geopolitical stance and historical alliances, the Chinese media's framing seems to reflect its own strategic interests and global positioning. Such variations echo the intricate interplay between media, politics, and international relations, underscoring the potency of media in shaping and reflecting national perspectives. Through the lens of the Agenda-Setting Theory, the author discerns that the selection and presentation of information by these media outlets carry far-reaching implications. The divergent prioritization of aspects within the coverage not only mirrors each nation's strategic interests but also serves to influence public opinion and policy discussions domestically and internationally. This analysis reaffirms the core principles of agenda setting — that the media's power transcends mere reporting, extending to actively influencing what society thinks about and how it thinks about it.

As this study demonstrates, the comparative analysis of media framing and agenda setting is instrumental in unearthing the intricate mechanisms behind media narratives. It underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of media landscapes in a globalized world, where information dissemination plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, shaping policy responses, and ultimately impacting international dynamics. The Bucha incident serves as a microcosm of the broader media ecosystem, where choices in framing echo the intricacies of geopolitical relationships and domestic imperatives. In a world of diverse media landscapes and evolving communication technologies, this study serves as a reminder that the way media outlets prioritize and frame news stories extends beyond mere information sharing — it's a multifaceted process that wields influence over public discourse, diplomacy, and global perceptions. As future events unfold on the global stage, the comparative lens applied to media framing and agenda setting serves to illuminate the complexities of modern information dissemination, aiding in the deciphering of the intricate threads that shape the understanding of the world.

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